On Becoming an Arab  A personal history.

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I remember the very day that I became colored.

-Zora Neale Hurston

The teacher called on me to read. I started haltingly. She began interrupting me, correcting me, quietly at first but gradually, as I stumbled on, with more and more irritation, leaving her desk now to stand over me and pounce on every mistake I made. She was an irascible woman, and I had not prepared my homework.

"You're an Arab!" she finally screamed at me. "An Arab! And you don't know your own language!"

"I am not an Arab!" I said, suddenly furious myself. "I am Egyptian! And anyway we don't speak like this!" And I banged my book shut.

"Read!"

I sat on stonily, arms folded.

"Read!"

I didn't move.

She struck me across the face. The moment afterward seemed to go on forever, like something in slow motion.

I was twelve and I'd never before been hit by a teacher-and never slapped across the face by anyone. Miss Nabih, the teacher, was a Palestinian. A refugee.

The year was 1952, the year of the Revolution. What Miss Nabih was doing to me in class the government was doing to us through the media. I remember how I hated that incessant rhetoric. Al-Qawmiya al-Arabia! al Uraba! Nahnu al-Arab! Arab nationalism! Arabness! We the Arabs! Even now, just remembering those words I feel again a surge of mingled irritation and resentment. Propaganda is unpleasant. And one could not escape it. The moment one turned on the radio there it was: military songs, nationalistic songs, and endless, endless speeches in that frenetic, crazed voice of nationalistic exhortation and propaganda. Anywhere in public places, in the street, it filled the air, coming at one from the grocery, the newsstand, the cafe, the garage, and always blaring at full volume-for it became patriotic now to have it on at full volume.

Imagine what it would be like if, say, the British or French were now being incessantly told, with nobody allowed to contest, question, or protest—that they were now European, and only European. European! European! And endless songs about it. But actually for us and in relation to Egypt it was even worse, and anyway more complicated than this. Its equivalent would be rather if the British or French were now being told that they were white—White! White! White! Because the new definition of who we were unsettled and undercut the old understanding of who we were and silently excluded people who had been included in the old definition of Egyptian. Copts, for example, were not Arab. In fact they were Copts precisely because they had refused to convert to the religion of the Arabs and had refused, unlike us Muslims, to intermarry with Arabs. As a result Copts (members of the ancient Christian church of Egypt) were the only truly indigenous inhabitants of Egypt and as such, in our home anyway and in the notion of Egypt with which I grew up, Copts had a very special place in the country. In this new definition of us however they were kind of included as speakers of Arabic, but they were not at the heart of the new definition-in the way that we were.

But of course the people who were most directly, although as yet only implicitly, being excluded by our redefinition now were the Jews of Egypt. For the whole point of the new Revolutionary government's harping
insistence now that we were Arab, in these first years following the founding of Israel, and following the take-over of Egypt's government by New Men with a new vision and new commitments, was to proclaim our unequivocal alignments: on the side of the Palestinians and Arabs and against Israel, against Zionism. At this point, and ever since, this issue has been at the heart of the different emphases placed on Egypt's identity by its leaders—Egyptian or Arab. If they proclaimed insistently and emphatically (as Nasser did) that we were Arab, it meant that we would take a confrontational, unyielding line on Israel and that we would "never deal with the Zionists." If we were Egyptians above all (Sadat) then we could talk, negotiate.

Our new identity proclaimed openly our opposition to Israel and Zionism—and proclaimed implicitly our opposition to the "Zionists" in our midst: Egyptian Jews. For although explicitly Zionism was distinguished from Jewishness, an undertow meaning "Jewish" was also contained in the word. The word "Arab" emerging at this moment to define our identity carried within it silently its polar opposite—Zionist/Jew—with which hidden, silent connotation it actually had no meaning. For the whole purpose of its emergence now was precisely to tell us of our new alignments and realignments in relation to both those terms: Arab and Jew.

Jews and Copts were not, to me, in those days, abstractions. They were people my parents knew and saw and talked about and they were my brothers' friends and my sister's and my own, including my best friend Joyce, whose family were Egyptian Jews. I am sure I sensed these insidious, subterranean shifts and re-arrangements of our feelings that this new bludgeoning propaganda was silently effecting or trying to effect in us. And I am sure that this, as well as the sheer hatefulness anyway of being endlessly subjected to propaganda, was part of the reason why I so much disliked and resisted the idea that I was an Arab.

Nor was it only through the media that the government was pressuring us into accepting its broad political purpose and agenda and coercing us into being Arab. For this was the era too of growing political repression and of the proliferation of the mukhabarat, the secret police, and the era when political opponents and people suspected of being disloyal to the Revolution were being jailed or disappearing. In this atmosphere being disloyal to the Revolution, and to the Arab cause (being, as it were, un-Arab), became as charged and dangerous for Egyptians as being un-American was for Americans in the McCarthy era.

The propaganda worked on me and on others. To question our Arabness and all that our Arabness implied, became unthinkable. Only despicable, unprincipled, unpatriotic traitors would do such a thing. And it is with this complicated legacy that my own sense of identity as Egyptian and as Arab is entangled.

The following pages recount a personal odyssey through the politics, emotions and history of our becoming Arab. For, as I found, no matter how carefully I examined them, my memories and feelings remained recalcitrantly opaque, until I took this journey into history and into the history of the world of my childhood. These pages then both describe the information that I discovered and pieced together—some of it quite surprising and even shocking to me—and trace out also the process and voyage of discovery itself and my new understandings of my own past.

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Thinking back to the incident with which I began this chapter, I asked myself what this scene between me and Miss Nabih told me about my parents and family, from whom, certainly, I got my understanding of what it meant to be Egyptian. Why was it that I was so stubborn, so convinced that I was Egyptian and not Arab, definitely not Arab? Presumably this was what my parents thought, but why? Was this a class issue? Were they part of some elite milieu that imagined they were Egyptian while "the masses" knew all along that we were Arabs? When, in fact, did Egyptians become Arab—or have we always been Arab?

The answer to this question, which I assumed I would find simply by looking up a book or two on the history of Egypt actually took quite a lot of detective work, for it was not clearly or fully addressed in any of the books where I had expected to find it. It felt as if I had embarked in search of some esoteric secret. In the last few years there has begun to be a scholarship piecing together the history of the rise of Arab nationalism, but as regards Egypt it is a history as yet only barely sketched in.
The story, anyway, begins in Syria, in the late nineteenth century, where, as it turns out, the idea of an "Arab" identity and Arab nationalism first arose. Prior to this, throughout the Middle East, "Arab" had referred only to the inhabitants of Arabia, and to bedouins of the region's deserts. It was among the Christians of Syria, and in particular among a group of Syrian men who had attended French missionary schools, that the idea of Arab nationalism first appeared, in part as a movement of literary and cultural revival and in part as a way of mobilizing both Christian and Muslim Syrians to throw off the domination of the Islamic Ottoman Empire.

Egyptians, who in that era were preoccupied with getting rid of the British, not the Ottomans, were either uninterested in or positively hostile to this strange Syrian idea of an "Arab" identity. Mustapha Kamil, the leading nationalist of the day in Egypt, strongly pro-Ottoman and pro-Islamic, denounced the notion of an "Arab" nationalism as an idea invented and fomented by the Europeans with the object of hastening the destruction of the Ottoman empire. And paranoid though this idea sounds, there may have been some truth to it. Historical records suggest that British officials were indeed already encouraging and supporting the idea of Arabism even before World War I (that they did so during the War is well known).

Well into the first decades of our century, neither the self-defined new "Arabs" nor the Egyptians themselves thought that this new identity had anything to do with Egyptians. For example, in 1913 an Arab conference was organized in Paris. When an Egyptian, who was attending as observer, asked permission to speak, he was refused on the grounds that the floor was only open to Arabs.

During World War I, the idea of "Arab" nationalism emerged again as an important idea-and again as an idea mobilizing people against the Turks and their Islamic Empire. This time it took the form of the British-instigated "Arab Revolt" led by T. E. Lawrence. (The fact that this famous "Arab" revolt was led by an Englishman makes obvious, of course, Britain's political interest in promoting Arabism as a way fighting the Ottoman Empire and bringing about its final dissolution.) Once more, as with the Syrian form of Arab nationalism, not only were Egyptians not part of this movement, they were, if anything, inclined to be sympathetic to the other side. For one thing this Arab movement now involved mainly the Arabs of Arabia and nomadic tribal Arabs: people who, to Egyptians, were even more different from themselves than the Syrians. The distinction between settled and nomad is, in the Middle East, one of the fundamental divides. For Egyptians it is a distinction that has marked off their society from that of "the Arabs" (Arabians, nomads) since the beginning of their civilization.

In addition, these Arabs were fighting with the hated British, the oppressors of Egypt, and against the Islamic Empire and the Caliph of Islam. Egypt's Khedive Abbas had at this point been sent into exile by the British for his open sympathies with the Turks and the Islamic Empire, and so also had the leader of the Nationalist Party, Mohamad Farid. The Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz, in his novel Bain al-Qasrain (Palace Walk), set in the First World War, portrays his characters, the "common folk" of Egypt, praying for the return of Abbas and for the Turks to "emerge victorious," and declaring that the most important thing of all was that "we rid ourselves of the English nightmare" and for "the Caliphate to regain its glory." Aware of popular sentiments in Egypt, the British took care to represent the Arab Revolt to Egyptians as a rebellion not against the Caliph but against the "impious, godless" Young Turks who were oppressing "the Arabs."

At the end of the war the British invited the leaders of the Arabs to the Versailles Conference, but refused to permit the Egyptian leaders to attend. Still, the Arabs reaped no benefits from this. In a series of treaties the European powers (Britain and France) now dismantled the Ottoman Empire and distributed among themselves its former territories. For the British, having induced the Arabs to fight with them against the Turks by promising them independence, had also signed a secret treaty with the French (the Sykes-Picot agreement) undertaking to divide between them after the war "the spoils of the Ottoman Empire." Formalizing their control over the territories that they had just captured from the Ottomans, France took Syria and divided it into two countries, Lebanon and Syria, and Britain took Iraq and Palestine. Britain was of course already occupying Egypt. Similarly the Balfour Declaration, promising Palestine, a land, obviously, already with its own inhabitants, to people living elsewhere-designating it a national homeland for the Jews-had been issued earlier in 1917 when the British first captured Palestine. (There were of course Jews as well as Muslims and Christians among the population of Palestine when the British captured it, but it was not out of concern for Palestinian Jews that the British now declared Palestine a homeland for the Jews but rather-as is well known-in response to
the desires and hopes of European Jewry for a homeland in Palestine.)

Some of this of course I knew already. I knew about T. E. Lawrence and the Arab revolt, and I had known in a general way that Arab nationalism was a recent idea. But only now, putting together the Christian and missionary-inspired origins of Arab nationalism in Syria, and the use the British made of the idea to mobilize "the Arabs" against the Ottomans, did I realize the extent to which Arab nationalism had emerged above all as a way of opposing the Islamic Empire. And only now did I realize the extent to which Egypt had been not only not Arab, but had actually been mostly on the opposite side to that of the Arabs. The exiled Khedive and political leaders of Egypt supported the Ottomans and hated the British, and so apparently did the "masses." And even the modernizing intellectuals, who wanted political independence from the Ottomans, had all their cultural, intellectual, and personal ties with Turks and with Istanbul—which many of them regularly visited.

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And so already my understanding of Egypt and its relation to the Arabs was beginning to shift. Already I was beginning to feel that the world was not as I had assumed it to be and its seas and continents not after all where I had thought they were. Still, whatever internal shifts and readjustments were involved for me in what I had learned thus far, they were nothing to the geologic shifts and turmoil and upheaval that I would find myself flung up or cast down by as I read on, trying to piece together what happened next-and reading now about the history of the Jews in Egypt and about Egypt's relations to Zionism and the Palestinians.

Eventually things would calm down. Eventually I would come to see how these facts too were part of the history of Egypt and that after all they fit in quite intelligibly into that history. But to begin with, with almost every new detail I learned I found myself precipitated into this state of general agitation, my feelings running the gamut of shock, disbelief, shame, despair, and exhilaration—why exhilaration?—and finally, finally understanding. Physically I could not sit still; I could only read at most a paragraph or two at a time—at least whenever I stumbled upon one or other of these, to me, completely mind-blowing facts. I'd jump up and walk and walk, repeating to myself whatever it was I'd just read. Egyptians, I'd be rushing around saying to myself, joined their Zionist friends in Cairo and Alexandria to celebrate the Balfour Declaration? There were Zionist Associations in Cairo and Alex then? It was okay in Egypt to be Zionist? The Governor of Alexandria, Ahmad Ziyour Pasha—later Prime Minister of Egypt—had gone to a party in the city celebrating the Balfour Declaration that had culminated in their sending a telegram to Lord Balfour to thank him?

Hours and hours and days of this would then be interspersed with enormous, crashing, paralyzing anxieties at the very thought of writing about Arabness. There was no question I couldn't do it. I'd just have to leave it out. Just forget it, it was much too complicated. How could I possibly deal with all this history?

The first Jewish flag to fly over Jerusalem after its capture by the British was made in Egypt? Joseph Cicurel of the house of Cicurel (a department store I remembered from my own childhood—the Harrods of Cairo) had it made in his Alexandria workshops. Joseph was president of the Zionist Association of Cairo. And at the same time he was an Egyptian nationalist? Joseph, leading Zionist was also trustee of the Bank of Egypt—the bank founded by the Muslim nationalist Talaat Harb with the object of wresting control of the Egyptian economy from Europeans and placing it in Egyptian hands. The same was true of Leon Castro, vice-president of the same Zionist association and also Egyptian nationalist. A member of the Wafd, the party leading the Egyptian struggle for independence from the British, he was also friend and staunch supporter of Saad Zaghloul, leader of the Wafd and the hero of the Egyptian nationalist struggle.

On and on, more such extraordinary facts about Egyptians' relationship to Zionism—and also to the Palestinians. The Egyptian government had sent a representative—and we are now in 1925—to the celebrations for the inauguration of Hebrew University in Jerusalem. This representative had been none other than Ahmad Lutfi al-Sayyid, editor of al-Jarida, the paper that had shaped the political consciousness of a generation of Egyptians—my father's generation—and the man who would later facilitate women's entry into the Egyptian University. And in the late twenties and early thirties, when Palestinians began publishing a paper in Egypt advocating their cause, the Egyptian government several times closed it down and banned the publication of "Palestinian propaganda." And in the wake of the Wailing Wall troubles and Muslim fears about rights of access to the al-
Aqsa Mosque, also in the early thirties, they even banned the invocation of the name of Palestine in mosques on Fridays. Meanwhile several Zionist papers continued publication and Zionism was not banned.

Reading such facts as these and observing my own feelings and the paralyzing anxiety I felt at the mere thought of writing of such things, I came to conclude that this sort of information did not ordinarily figure in history books on Egypt precisely because, according to the political alignments of our day, alignments that we consider to be entirely obvious and natural, they seemed so shamefully unpatriotic, and so disloyal and unfeeling toward the Palestinians.

In the ensuing days I would begin to understand how it was that Egyptian attitudes had been so profoundly different from what they are today, and I would come to understand also my own connection to that past and the ways in which it was interwoven with my own early life. But even then, even when I'd understood all this, I would still find myself completely stalled and unable still to imagine how I could possibly write about these things.

Still feeling totally paralyzed, I began to analyze my paralysis as a product of my having internalized the taboos against questioning Arabness that had been part, after all, of my adolescence. But this insight—if it was an insight—did me no good. I was still perfectly capable of silencing myself without any external prohibitions.

Quite a number of remarkable Egyptians, I had discovered along the way, had been suspected or accused of either being too pro-Jewish or too conciliatory and too weak on Zionism or of being deficient in their Arabness or their loyalty to Arabness. Among those whose actions or words or positions one way or another laid them open to such charges were Saad Zaghloul, hero of Egyptian nationalism, and Taha Husain and Tewfik al-Hakim and Naguib Mahfouz—three of Egypt's finest writers. Major figures in the country's history. The equivalent in American terms would be to find that Harry Truman, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Eugene O'Neill had all been suspected of un-American inclinations. And of course there was Anwar Sadat, gunned down at least in part for his retreat—and all that such a retreat implied—from Nasser's position as to Egypt's fundamental Arabness.

But knowing this made no difference either. Nothing unfroze me.

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Then one evening as I was walking home, something began to shift. I am not sure quite why or how things began to change, but I know that the shift was connected to, or more precisely was the direct outcome of, the preceding perfectly pleasant but uneventful few hours. I was in Cambridge for the year on a fellowship (it was here that I pursued and pieced together this history) and had gone out to hear a talk by the Lebanese novelist Hanan al-Sheykh. She'd come down from London to speak at the Oriental Studies Faculty. Hanan was already there when I arrived and rose to greet me—which took me by surprise: we had met only once briefly in America in a crowd and I hadn't expected her to recognize me. It had felt good, I realized, sitting down and looking around me, to be recognized, and to be greeted in the way that, in the world in which I had once lived, one automatically greeted people—or at least, other women. The room was more crowded than it had been for the previous lecturers. Aside from Tareef and Bassim, who were the professors at the Oriental Faculty, and some students, the audience did not seem to be the usual academic crowd that I'd seen at other lectures. Hanan's reputation had clearly drawn out from wherever they were, in their separate spaces, a good number of the town's Arab and, I guessed from their looks, specifically Lebanese community. There were several older people there, in particular women, living, for whatever reason, in this exile. Here now to honor one of their own, to take pride in her, to listen to her words—and to remember.

Hanan, a slight, beautiful woman, began to read in a clear, soft voice and the room fell quiet, an intent look of pleasure and anticipation already on people's faces. Her paper, about how she became a writer, was full of evocations of the streets and cafes of Beirut, and of its dusty, cluttered, narrow book shops, and of her youthful discoveries of the classics of contemporary Arabic literature, and of poetry read and heard and ideas exchanged under the apple trees. It began, almost at once, to work its enchantment. As the minutes passed the faces around me grew perceptibly happier, mellower, more relaxed. Even Bassim and Tareef I could see, sitting facing me on
either side of her-dear colleagues both but men who, as I knew, were somewhat skeptical of this phenomenon of
the fame of Arab women writers-were looking mellow and happy and relaxed and had clearly been won over.

I found myself thinking enviously that this was what I would like to be writing-something that would affirm my
community in exile. Something that would remind them of how lovely our lives, our countries, our ways are.
How lovely our literature. What a fine thing, whatever it is people say of us, what a fine thing it is, in spite of
them all, to be Arab, what a wonderful heritage we have. Something that would sustain them. Sustain us. What
wouldn't I give, I sat there thinking, listening to her quoting Arab poets, to have had that in my past, all that
wealth of Arabic literature that had nurtured her as writer, what wouldn't I give now to have all those poets and
writers to remember and write about and remind people of. I loved the lines she had quoted-but I appreciated
them, I realized, only the way I might the poetry of a foreign tongue that I somewhat knew. They did not have
for me the resonances of lines learnt long ago. Nor, of course, since they were in literary Arabic, did they have
the charge and redolence and burdened evocativeness of a language spoken in childhood and youth and in love
and anger and just in the ordinary moments of living. But on the other hand they didn't have that wealth and
redolence for her either. Even though she clearly loved the literature and language and was herself a fine Arabic
writer, for her too it was a language she had not spoken in childhood and did not speak now. Nobody speaks
literary Arabic-or maybe just some pedant somewhere.

We went afterward-Hanan, Tareef, Bassim, Zeeba (another colleague) and I-for drinks at King's. The mood of
the lecture stayed with us, our talk pleasant, relaxed, easy. At some point Hanan asked me what I was working
on. I was vague, evasive, guilty. I even lied a little. 'I'm looking at Egypt's history,' I said, 'twentieth century.'
And then for the rest of the evening I felt guilty, sitting there like a Judas among these friends. I felt like a
betrayer. Was it even imaginable that I could have responded, sitting there among them-two Lebanese, one
Palestinian, one Iranian, three out of four having been made homeless one way or another by Israeli aggression
or by some spinoff of that conflict-was it conceivable that I could say, "Well, actually I am looking into this
whole question of the Arabness of Egyptian identity. I am trying to really look at it, deconstruct it. You see I
remember . . ." It was completely unimaginable, impossible, inconceivable.

I felt like a betrayer.

Coming out onto King's Parade afterwards, the night suddenly balmy, the street almost empty though it wasn't
that late, people's voices carrying clear, loud, the way they do sometimes on summer nights-but not usually now,
in winter, winter on the point of turning to spring-I walked on homeward, down Senate House Passage and
along the narrow road onto the bridge. There was a crescent moon over the trees in a deep, deep sky.

I did feel kin, of course, and I did feel that I was among people who were, in some quite real sense, my
community. But was this because of "Arabness"? Was I, for instance, really likely to feel more kin, more at
home, with someone from Saudi Arabia than with, say, someone from Istanbul? I doubted it. (Saudis speak
Arabic, Turks don't). This, though, was not really the issue now. I realized now that my feelings of being
completely prohibited from writing about Arabness were not, or not only, a response to old prohibitions or a fear
of breaking some mental taboo internalized in adolescence. No, my fear that I would, in this act of unraveling,
cross over the line into betrayal was about real not abstract betrayal. I'd been so set to begin with on this act of
unraveling, this taking apart of the notion of Arabness. It had seemed to me so essential, so necessary to
understanding what it was that I'd lived through, and essential and necessary also to freeing myself from the
unbearable lies that I'd forever felt trapped in. Essential and necessary in one sense, and yet also to proceed
would inevitably, as it now felt, take me over the line into betrayal. And so thinking about it now, from the
context of having been with people I liked and felt in some sense kin with, I wondered what it could possibly
matter, when weighed against the reality of people being driven from their homes or penned into impossible
lives, that I had felt myself coerced into being something that I did not feel I was? A small, trivial nothing of a
detail to put up with as a way of conveying to them solidarity and support.

But I am not here to betray, I said, waiting now at the traffic lights. Had I said it out loud? I looked around-there
was nobody there anyway.

I am not here to betray. I just do not want to live any longer with a lie about who I am. I don't want any longer
to live with lies and manipulations, I can't stand to be caught up like this forever in other people's inventions, imputations, false constructions of who I am-what I think, believe, feel, or ought to think or believe or feel.

But how-if I don't directly address this-how will I ever free myself from lies?

If I didn't live where I live, I thought to myself now, if I were still living in Egypt, I probably wouldn't feel that it was so absolutely necessary to extricate myself from this enmeshment of lies. In Egypt the sense of falseness and coercion would be there in a political sense, but at least in ordinary daily life I'd just be another Egyptian-whereas in the West it's impossible for me to ever to escape, forget, this false constructed Arabness. It's almost always somehow there, the notion that I am Arab, in any and every interaction. And sometimes it's quite grossly and offensively present-depending on how bigoted or ignorant the person I am confronting is.

But this is a problem, I realized now, arising out of their notion of Arab-the Western, not the Arab notion of Arab. So there are two different notions of Arab that I am trapped in-both false, both heavily freighted with another, silent cargo. Both imputing to me feelings and beliefs that aren't mine. They overlap in some ways, but they are not, I am sure, identical. But this was a piece of the puzzle-the fact that there were two different notions of Arab-that for the moment I would have to defer figuring out.

Anyway, I am not here to betray. I am taking apart the notion of Arabness and following out the history of when and how we became Arab, just to know-not with the object of, or as code for, the betrayal of anybody. For Egyptians to debate or question their Arabness ("search" for their identity) is usually code, as I realize now, for debating the extent of our responsibility towards the Palestinians. And it is accordingly read by Arabs and by Egyptians as a covert way of advocating either support for, or abandonment of, the Palestinians. But my own exploration of the question here is not code for anything. My sole object here is only to see things, as clearly and exactly as I know how, for what they are. And to free myself of lies.

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And so in any case one reason that Zionism was permitted to be overtly present in Egypt in that era, and that prominent members of the government and governing classes were sympathetic to Zionism, was that Egyptians seemed not to know what is so obvious to us in hindsight-that making Palestine into a homeland for the Jews would eventually entail the expulsion and dispossession of the Palestinians. There had been at that point as yet no large-scale immigration of Europeans to Palestine and, at the end of the 1910s and through most of the twenties, when troubles broke out intermittently in Palestine the government and media in Egypt typically reacted by exhorting the Jews and Muslims and Christians of Palestine to work together to find a peaceful solution, offering themselves as mediators, and worrying that this reprehensible interreligious intercommunal violence would spread to their own country. Because of this last concern, newspapers (or at least some newspapers) and the government were inclined to respond to news of outbreaks of violence in Palestine by reiterating even more firmly their own total commitment to preserving religious pluralism and the government in addition took such measures as banning Palestinian "propaganda" for fear that interreligious hostilities, particularly anti-Jewish violence (unknown in Egypt as yet), would come to their own land.

For, as of 1918, the modernizing intellectuals and their party, the Wafd, had begun to become the uncontested political leaders of the nation. And in the early twenties their political goals and platform-democracy, a Constitution guaranteeing among other things the rights of the individual, pluralism, and an implicit secularism committed to the equal rights of all Egyptians regardless of religion-won the support of the nation in a landslide election that carried small villages as well as major cities. These goals, conceived and defined in the first place by the country's political and intellectual leadership, received also in this era the endorsement of the populace as a whole.

Egypt's experiment in democracy would be conducted under difficult circumstances. The British, refusing to give Egypt complete independence, still retained important powers and sometimes interfered outright in the democratic process-at one point, later, forcing the King, literally at gunpoint (surrounding his palace with their tanks), to appoint the prime minister they wanted. The King for his part plotted to wrest power back from the government to himself. Despite these difficulties the country did make political progress and there were even
some exhilarating times and significant achievements, among them the promulgation of a Constitution in 1923, Article 3 of which granted equal rights to all Egyptians, "without distinction of race, language, or religion." The same principles were once more reiterated in Egypt's Nationality Laws, which went into effect in 1929 with the formal dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the replacement of Ottoman citizenship with a brand new nationality, the Egyptian nationality. These principles and a commitment to Egypt as a multireligious community were furthermore made clear and visible to all in the composition of the government. When, in 1924, Zaghloul became Egypt's first elected Prime Minister, Jews as well as Copts served in his Cabinet—and indeed both Jews and Copts would continue to serve in the Egyptian government in the following decades.

As all this shows, not only was the country's political leadership deeply committed to the goal of preserving Egyptian society as a pluralist society; in addition Jews were integrally part of the community of Egypt and of its political and cultural leadership, and they were the friends and colleagues and co-workers of Muslim and Coptic Egyptians. Then there were other factors, too, influencing how Egyptians related to the issue of Palestine. Most obviously, there were no Palestinians (or very few) in Egypt at this time, and certainly there was no historical community of Palestinians— as there was a historic Jewish community. In this era about half the Jewish community of Egypt—a community of about 65,000—were Egyptian Jews. The rest were recent immigrants from other territories of the Ottoman Empire and from Europe. (These latter often looked down on the local Jewish community, particularly the Jewish working classes who were indistinguishable in culture and ways from working-class Muslims and Copts. (Middle- and upper-class Jews, like Copts and Muslims of their class, were fast becoming Europeanized.)

And then finally there was the fact that Egyptians at this point did not as yet (and at any class level) see themselves as Arab or as having any special connection with the Arabs, nor did they as yet think that they had any particular interest in or special responsibility for what transpired in Palestine.

Egyptian attitudes began to shift toward a sympathy with the Palestinians in the thirties as the situation in Palestine began to change when, with the rise of Fascism in Europe, European Jewish immigration to Palestine increased enormously. Palestinian political activism increased. Through the thirties Palestinian strikes and rebellions against the British and their struggles with Zionists were constantly in the news. By the late thirties the Palestinians had won the sympathies of Egyptians. Fund-raisers and various other events in support of Palestine and in aid of Palestinian relief were held at all class levels— including by Huda Shaarawi's Feminist Union, among the first associations to organize a region-wide conference in support of the Palestinians.

Most important, in terms of publicizing the situation of Palestinians and mobilizing popular support for them, the Muslim Brotherhood, dedicated to instituting an Islamic government in Egypt and to freeing all Muslim lands from imperialists, vigorously took up the Palestinian cause. They began to hold protest demonstrations on Balfour Day, and began regularly to address the issue of Palestine in their Friday sermons.

It was these sorts of activities that, as I mentioned earlier, the government had been attempting to suppress, out of its commitment to a pluralist Egypt and its desire to prevent the spread of interreligious strife. And the government continued through the thirties to try to suppress inflammatory pro-Palestinian activities and to keep Egypt out of direct involvement of the question of Palestine. This was the position assumed not only by the Wafd when they were in power, but by the several governments formed by different parties in this era. This view represented, in other words, the consensus position of the governing classes across party lines. And so a rift began to form in Egypt on the issue of Palestine, not on the matter of sympathy or the lack of it for the Palestinians, but as to what Egypt's political involvement should be: a rift, initially, not so much between the governing classes and "the masses" as between the government and governing classes on the one hand and the Brotherhood's position on the other.

Through the thirties the demonstrations organized by the Brotherhood grew steadily more massive and began to take the direction that the government had, all along, feared they would take. In 1936 the Brotherhood called for a boycott of Jewish businesses. In the same year the first anti-Jewish graffiti to be reported in Egypt appeared in Port Said. In 1938, police clashed with Brotherhood demonstrators—some of whom were shouting "Down with the Jews"— and tried to prevent them from entering the Jewish quarter of Old Cairo.
It was in the thirties that a few intellectuals-two or three men to begin with, all of whom had links with the Arabs-began to express the idea that Egypt should align itself with the Arabs and regard itself as Arab. But it was probably the emphasis the Muslim Brotherhood now placed on this idea that helped spread it most effectively. While the government had emphasized Egypt's heritage as quintessentially and indissolubly multicultural (Pharoanic, Mediterranean, and Islamic, as they put it in those days) as a way of legitimizing its determined emphasis on pluralism as a fundamental goal for this country, the Brotherhood countered by asserting that Islam and only Islam constituted Egypt's defining identity. It was Islam, they declared, that had saved Egypt from its pagan past (thereby conveniently erasing from history the fact that the majority of Egyptians had been Christian at the time of the Arab invasion), an Islam brought to the country, they stressed, by Arabs. All Egyptians therefore, and all Muslims, owed a particular debt to the Arabs and had an obligation to help liberate Arab lands from infidel imperialists.

By the end of the thirties the popularity of the Palestinian cause and the growing influence of the Brotherhood forced the government and dominant political parties to begin to slant their message differently. In 1939 a prominent member of the Wafd made headlines by writing an article declaring "Egypt is Arab!"

Through World War II overt political activism and demonstrations were banned under the Emergencies Act. When they resumed after the war the pro-Palestinian demonstrations organized by the Muslim Brotherhood proceeded along the course of ever greater intercommunal tensions and anti-Jewish violence that the government and the different political parties had all along feared. Huge demonstrations held on Balfour Day in 1945 and again in 1947, in particular, spilled over into violent attacks on Jews and also now on any other group deemed "foreign." Jewish and European and Coptic shops were attacked and looted, as were synagogues and Catholic and Greek-Orthodox and Coptic churches. One synagogue was set on fire.

* * *

The unraveling of that old world and its society are just dimly part of the fabric of my own memories.

I remember being at play in the garden one dusk when the news came that al-Na'rashi, the Prime Minister, had been shot. "Atalu al-Na'rashi!" They killed al-Na'rashi! "They" I know now, were the Muslim Brothers. There was somberness then, certainly, in our home. My parents, I believe, knew the Na'rashis. But not only somberness, there was something electric, still there even now in my memory, about how they uttered the words and how they spoke of this death. Now I imagine them saying to each other, the adults, living through these crises and troubled times, what next now for the country, what next?

And I remember the midnight blue paper on the windows, purplish when the daylight came through it, during the '48 war with Israel, and being woken in the night and taken downstairs, to the entree-the entry, a room with no windows and only a heavy glass and iron-work door, where everyone was gathered in the darkness, talking, listening to the bombs fall.

This was a few months before the assassination of Na'rashi (al-Nuqrashi) as the history books, not my memory, tell me.

And then, in retaliation for Na'rashi's murder, Hasan al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brothers and its Supreme Guide, was gunned down. This I do not remember. The Muslim Brotherhood, by now an enormously powerful organization in the country with a vast membership and its own secret military units, was engaged through the forties in a terrorist and counter-terrorist war with the political establishment. Al-Banna died in the hospital to which he was brought and where, by order of King Farouk, he was given no medical treatment.

It was by order of Farouk, too, that Egypt went to war with Israel. After the United Nations resolution to partition Palestine and when Israel declared itself a state in 1948 the Egyptian political establishment-both Government and Opposition-had favored a cautious response: a verbal not a military response. But Farouk harbored dreams-now that the Ottoman Empire was gone-of having himself declared Caliph of Islam. He worried that, if Egypt did not go to war now, King Abdullah of Jordan, who had declared that Jordan would go to war, would reap glory on the battlefield and put an end his own dreams. And so, pre-empting the Egyptian
Government's decision and in violation of the Constitution, he ordered military units to cross into Palestine. After the fact the Government hastily convened a meeting to bestow a semblance of legality on the King's orders. The Opposition however, and in particular the Liberal Constitutionalists, who (as the history books put it) out of a "narrow Egyptian secular nationalism" were "most impervious to Palestinian appeals," were fiercely critical of this government action.

But of course it was not that Farouk had been pervious to Palestinian appeals. Nor was it only Farouk for whom, now, taking up the Palestinian cause was essentially an avenue to the fulfillment of his own political ambitions. While Na'rashi was making speeches cautioning against a hasty military response, Hasan al-Banna was declaring in mosques the Muslim Brotherhood's readiness for a jihad against the Zionists. But he too was in reality furthering his own cause. In the forties the Brotherhood had a trained secret army of about 75,000 men. But they reportedly sent to the Palestine campaign just 600. The movement was hoping, say historians, to reserve most of its secret units for its Egyptian war-its war on the cities of Egypt.

By this point, that is, Palestine and the Palestinian cause had just begun to be what they have been ever since in the politics of the Arab world: an issue that the Middle East's villains and heroes would use to manipulate people's sympathies and to further their own political ends and fantasies of power-with what costs or benefits to the Palestinian people only the Palestinians themselves can say.

* * *

Where did my own parents stand in all this? I don't know. I was too young and do not remember. It would be quite impossible for me to have grasped what they said enough to be able to say, now, they said this or believed that.

And yet also now-I think I know.

But the evidence I have is so vague, so insubstantial, so inconclusive. Some things I do know and do remember beyond the shadow of a doubt. For instance, I know that they definitely did not like the Muslim Brothers. I don't remember any particular thing that they said about them, but I do remember this as a general feeling. And I do remember that a man who was a relative by marriage (a younger man beholden in some way, looking in some way to my father) was a Muslim Brother, and that he emerged from prison at some point (still, now, in the days of King Farouk) and that he had tuberculosis and that he came to our house and that my father, making clear to him (and evidently to all of us) his total disapproval of his politics, helped him get treatment.

I don't remember in any way that I would now be able to reproduce what they were saying as they lived through these wrenching times in the history of Egypt. But I was there, obviously, and heard them talk and no doubt in some sense absorbed what they were saying. And they were people who talked politics. Over lunch when my father came home from work and we, on weekends when we were home from school, joined them. Over tea and the papers in the early morning, sitting in my mother's huge bed where we, joining them, half-listened to them talk. What exactly was the content of that grief and somberness that descended over our home, and the feeling of charged tension that I remember when Na'rashi was shot? What exactly did they say, then, to each other? And what did they say when al-Banna was shot-and allowed to die, untreated, by order of the King?

That's another thing I do incontrovertibly know and remember: they did not like King Farouk.

And what did they say when there were riots in Egypt and attacks on synagogues and churches? And what did they say as we sat in the dark in the entree, listening to the sound of distant bombs and anti-aircraft fire, and then a nearer, louder, more frightening explosion? What were they saying about the war with Israel? Could they have been among those who condemned the King for getting us into this war? Could they have been among those who, like the Government Opposition, condemned the government for "lending any semblance of legitimacy" to the King's action? Could they have been among those who, like the Liberal Constitutionalists, out of a "narrow Egyptian secular nationalism," opposed the war? Could they have been among those "impervious to Palestinian appeals" who believed that Egypt should not go to war with Israel?
Could they have been among those for whom grief over what was happening to Egypt over rode and took priority over what was happening to the Palestinians?

Though I do not remember their words I would have picked up their import and their attitudes would certainly have shaped my responses to whatever I encountered at school.

Including of course Miss Nabih.

I did not know, until I read into this history and learned what I have here set down, that there had been Egyptians-perfectly ordinary, decent, upright, principled citizens of Egypt, not disloyal, unpatriotic, unfeeling people-who believed in something else, some other idea of Egypt and its society and future, and who openly argued against and stood opposed to getting involved in supporting the Palestinians and going to war with Israel. My parents were the people that they were. Of the class that they were, the milieu that they were, the era that they were. And they had the feelings and beliefs about Egypt that they had, and the hopes for Egypt that they had. Not indifference to the Palestinians and their sufferings, nor commitment to some "narrow Egyptian secular nationalism," but, quite simply, loyalty to their own community and the people, Copts, Jews, and Muslims, who made up that community. That was what they had held onto and refused to be moved from. Loyalty to their actual community over and above some fictive, politically created community that the politicians ordered them to be loyal to. And, yes, their overall position reflected their particular hopes for Egypt and their commitment to what we today call "pluralism." But "pluralism" after all is simply a modern word for what, in another world and in other eras, had been their heritage. It was tradition, from generation to generation, in Cairo and Alexandria and Spain and Morocco and Istanbul.

Beginning to understand all this, then, had been the source of those moments of exhilaration in the midst of turbulence—coming to understand finally what had been the history and prehistory of my own conflicted feelings.

My parents taught me so well, instilled in me so deeply their notion of what it was to be Egyptian that I still mourn and am always still and all over again filled with an enormous sense of loss at the thought of the destruction of the multi-religious Egyptian community that I knew. And still, now, news of inter-communal violence in Egypt, and of attacks on Copts (there are no Jews there now) and also of course of attacks on Muslims (but it is the Copts who are the beleaguered community) is almost the bleakest kind of news that I know coming out of there.

* * *

In 1941 Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Minister, proposed the creation of an Arab League—to include Egypt. This British proposal precipitated intense debate that polarized Egyptians. Was Egypt Arab? Mediterranean? Pharoanic? Britain had put forward the idea as a counter-proposal to an idea that Iraq had been advancing: the creation of a federated Arab state to consist of Iraq, Syria, Jordan, and Palestine. Such a federation, should it occur, could lead to the rise of a formidable new power in the Middle East—and this was something Britain did not want. It was something Egypt did not want either. As the region began to adjust to the disappearance of Turkey as the center of Empire and the newly emergent countries began to vie for regional dominance, Egypt—at that point the richest, most developed and most populous nation in the region—had no intention of ceding power and influence to Iraq or Jordan or to any federation of these. Thus in 1943 the Egyptian government agreed to the British proposal and the Arab League was formed in 1945.

And so here we are, in 1945—and Egypt, for reasons of regional strategy, officially becomes an Arab country, although not as yet necessarily, exclusively and only Arab, as it would become under Nasser. And again, curiously, Britain had played the role of instigator and as it were of midwife to the birthing of yet another Arab nation. Once more, as with its leadership of the Arab revolt, Britain's purpose in urging Egypt to define itself as Arab was, of course, the furtherance specifically of British political interests.

It was as if we had become Arab, and all the region gradually had become Arab (when, once, only Arabia had been Arab) because the Europeans saw us as Arabs—all of us as just Arabs. And because, to serve their own political interests and in pursuit of their own ends—the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire, the acquisition of
new colonial territories, retaining control of territories under their mandate-it was strategically and politically useful to them, in this particular era in history, to define us, and to have us define ourselves, as Arabs. And gradually over this era we had all complied: imagining this, correctly or not, to be in our own interest too.

The Europeans were defining us and we, falling in with their ideas, agreed to define ourselves as Arab in the dictionary sense: "a member of the Semitic people of the Arabian peninsula; a member of an Arabic-speaking people." But the Europeans were also defining us as Arab in quite another sense. Just as with the word "African"-"a native or inhabitant of Africa; a person of immediate or remote African ancestry; esp: Negro"-there is no trace in this dictionary definition of "African" of the word's pejorative connotations. There is nothing here of what anyone who has heard of O. J. Simpson or The Bell Curve, or who knows anything about American history, knows that that word means. This is the case also with the word "Arab," which similarly comes in European tongues internally loaded in the negative.

Such words carry within them entire landscapes, entire histories.

The European Powers in this era defined us as "Arab" in this other sense by what they did. They defined us as "Arab" in this sense when they made an agreement with Sheikh Abdullah and those who fought alongside Lawrence, promising them independence-and then broke their agreement. They defined us as "Arab" at the Peace Conferences of Versailles and Sevres when they dealt with Middle Eastern territories as, merely, spoils of the Ottoman Empire, to be divided now between France and Britain as booty-bargaining with one another for this bit or that, drawing lines and borders on their maps with little concern for the people and lands they were carving up. And they defined us as "Arab" when they assigned an already inhabited land to be a homeland for people living, then, elsewhere. They defined us as "Arab" when they led Egyptians to believe that in return for neutrality during the war they would get independence-and failed to keep their promise and exiled leaders and fired on demonstrators who dared protest. They defined us as "Arab" when they set aside the results of elections and forced the appointment of a particular prime minister.

"Arabs" meant people with whom you made treaties that you did not have to honor-arabs being by definition people of a lesser humanity and there being no need to honor treaties with people of lesser humanity. It meant people whose lands you could carve up and apportion as you wished, because they were of a lesser humanity. It meant people whose democracies you could obstruct at will-because you did not have to behave justly to people of a lesser humanity. And what could mere arabs, anyway, know of democracy and democratic process?

Until now, all who had come to this land of Egypt-Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Turks-had known that they were coming to a place of civilization. All, until now, had come knowing that they had as much to learn here as to teach, as much to take, in terms of knowledge and ways of understanding and of living, as to give. That, until now, was how it had been.

The Europeans began writing their meaning of the word "arab" freely and indiscriminately all over those lands from about 1918 on, when the Middle East as a whole fell into their hands. Prior to this, during their rule in Egypt, that meaning of the word had occasionally surfaced-at Dinshwai for instance-but it had not been the dominant, consistent hallmark of their conduct.

And so in those years they scribbled their meaning of "arab" all over the landscape, in their acts and in the lines they drew on maps, tracing out their meaning in a script at once cryptic and universal: as cryptic and universal as the mark of a snake or the trail of deer on a blank page of snow.

And in time, quite soon, their meaning of the word "arab" would enter our meaning of it too. Not etymologically, in the way that dictionaries trace meanings through transformations from word to word to word. No. It entered it corrosively, changing it from within, as if the European meaning were a kind of virus eating up the inside of the word "Arab," replacing it with itself-leaving it unchanged on the outside. Think of what it did to the words "African," "Africa": somehow, somehow, loading those words in the negative.

The European meaning of "arab," then, hollowed out our word and replaced it entirely with itself. Except that
now ours is their meaning of the word "arab" in reverse. Like "black" and "Black," as in "Black is beautiful."

It is this sense of "arab," the European sense, with its cargo of negativities, that I, living in the West, so often encounter and feel myself trapped in. This is the meaning of "arab," still very much alive, still very much around, that prompted me, for instance, to quickly hide my Arabic newspaper in my shopping so that people would not know I was Arab—and so react to me then, possibly, in some bigoted fashion as people all too commonly do when they discover I am Arab. Like the man-more extreme than usual-who spat at me on the bus in Cambridge when I was a student: smiling at first, asking me if I was Israeli and then, leaning towards me, seeing that the medallion I wore was after all Arabic, spitting right at me. And it is the meaning of "arab" that is there in my students' understanding when, as they grow more at ease with me, they disarming reveal that they would never have thought of calling me an Arab until I had called myself one, because, until then, they had thought the word was just an insult. And it is there in the countless micro-aggressions (as the author and legal scholar Patricia Williams calls them) that ordinarily and daily are part of the fabric of living for those of us in the West who belong to a "race" charged, in this culture, in the negative.

And it is there in the meanings threading Western books and films and newspapers and so on. I, like many I know who are Arab, never go to see a film in which I know that Arabs or Muslims figure. Naturally—why would I want to subject myself to the lies and racism that all too often are part of such things? This goes too for popular books on Arabs—their very popularity is usually an index of the fact that they are filled with bigotries and dehumanizations masquerading as truth.

* * *

But it would be another generation, not my parents' generation, not the generation who had grown up admiring European civilization, who would come to see clearly and to decipher for themselves what it was that the Europeans had scrawled across the landscape.

Nasser, born in 1917 and coming to consciousness entirely after the watershed year of 1918, was perhaps among the first to figure out (for he was, whatever his flaws, an astute man) the meaning of what they had traced there—and to respond to it by crystallizing the identity "arab" into its obverse "Arab." Although even he-as I discovered to my surprise—fully grasped that he was Arab only a few years before I got slapped for not knowing that I was Arab. For Nasser seems to have understood that he was Arab precisely by intently studying the marks and runes the imperialists had made upon the landscape. Reflecting on when it was that he understood that he was Arab, Nasser singles out the study of the recent history of the region, and above all (and he repeatedly returns to this) the history of Palestine, as critical to own understanding of himself as an Arab. He wrote in his Philosophy of the Revolution: "As far as I am concerned I remember the first elements of Arab consciousness began to filter into my mind as a student in secondary school, when I went out with my fellow schoolboys . . . every year as a protest against the Balfour Declaration whereby England gave the Jews a national home usurped unjustly from its legal owners. When I asked myself at the time," Nasser goes on, "why I left my school so enthusiastically and why I was angry for this land which I never saw I could not find an answer except the echoes of sentiment." Gradually,"a form of comprehension" began when he studied "the Palestine campaigns and the history of the region in general" in military college and finally that comprehension crystalized "when the Palestine crisis loomed on the horizon . . . "

"When I asked myself . . . why I was so angry . . . " Anger, as Nasser's own choice of words makes clear, was the key emotion to the early formation of his nascent identity as an Arab.

* * *

Spring is here.

The crocuses are out on the backs. Rivulets of blue, all along the pathways, vivdest, vivdest blue, and gashes and splashes of it on the verges and under the trees.

Why then, walking through this, did I suddenly feel this sense of loss—measureless, measureless loss-sweep
through me?

And so that, O my daughter, is what happened. That, in those years, is what happened to us.

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